**France by Bike and Barge**

**By Ken Christensen**

Whenever I visit France I try to do something or go somewhere different in the country. I once lived in France for eight years, yet large areas of the country remain relatively unknown to me. I spent five weeks in France this summer and I could have easily filled my time by making the rounds of friends and retelling the same stories to each friend. So I spent part of my time visiting friends and part of my time having some unique new adventures. When in Europe I find everything interesting and not just the famous sights. It’s not much of an exaggeration to say that every rock has a story. The best way to savor every house, garden, and village is on foot but something just as languid that will carry you further is to travel by bicycle. I rarely cycle in the States as I find the roads too busy and traffic too fast, but in France there are countless small roads with light traffic which are quiet and ideal for cycling. I decided to take in a section of the Loire River which has always been the preferred playground of kings and nobles for centuries and for good reason. The Loire combines all that is most appealing in a landscape, a wide river, rolling hills of agriculture, beautiful old villages, and more chateaus than you can shake a stick at. The Loire Valley is largely flat along the river making for easy cycling. I researched my trip before leaving, almost too much. You should always leave room for improvisation. I immediately found an excellent web site, La Loire a Velo, a government site which provides everything you need to know for such a trip. Another good site is Loire Velo Nature. Both web sites have English versions. (Bicyclette and Velo are both used in French for bicycle.) La Loire a Velo also lists accommodations along the way and there are forty-four pages of hotels, campgrounds, and bed and breakfasts. They also list companies that rent bikes. Many of these companies will arrange itineraries and allow you to pick up a bike in one location and drop it off in another, as I did. They will even transport your baggage to each day’s destination and have your bags waiting at your hotel if you should so desire. I don’t like to plan exactly where I’ll end up each day, allowing for chance encounters and detours. Accommodations are never a problem. In France, the next village is rarely more than five miles away and they usually have a hotel and several bed and breakfasts (chambres d’hote). A couple of good guide books are “Cycling the River Loire: The Way of St Martin” by John Higginson and the “Eyewitness Travel Guides: Loire Valley” by Dorling Kindersley. Higginson’s book is very good but almost too detailed and I rarely used it. The Eyewitness Travel Guides are excellent and a lot of fun to browse through and were very helpful in giving me just the right amount of information to appreciate the chateaus I visited.

Most sites and guides indicate that the most picturesque section of the river is between Anger and Orleans. I followed Higginson’s lead and decided to begin at Orleans and travel west, following the course of the river. This was the one small mistake that I made that I would change. By traveling east to west I constantly rode into the wind, and although it was rarely blowing hard and was not a major inconvenience, even pedaling against a breeze is noticeably more difficult than having the wind at your back. I rented my bike from Détours de Loire in Orleans. I had called ahead and arrived in Orleans by train from Paris then took a tram to the shop. After a few minutes of signing papers I was ready to roll. I politely declined the helmet which was included and the gentleman didn’t insist. That’s one thing I like about France; they allow you to break your neck if you wish. I just took a typical carry-on bag for planes and strapped it on the back of the bike with bungee cords the man gave me. My first day out I discovered one minor inconvenience. Every time I wanted to take a photo or sketch (I’m a landscape artist), I had to unstrap my bag from the back of my bike. So I stopped at a bike shop in another village and purchased a small bag which attaches to the handle bars; that way I could easily access my camera while still sitting on my bike. The man in the bike shop kidded with me about Lance Armstrong as he installed the bag for free. He also helped explain the twenty-one gears on my bike. Three gears are plenty for me but I quickly became used to this system and usually roamed among five gears. I must interject here that any rumors about the French disliking Americans is not only untrue but the opposite is closer to the truth. France is becoming even more tourist friendly and everywhere I went I noticed that more and more signs were posted in French and English, especially in tourist areas. Plus, the tourist offices in even the smallest towns are excellent and very helpful.

I started late in the afternoon my first day and after riding a bit along the Loire and Loiret, a smaller adjoining river, I compromised and stayed at a chain hotel near the city. The following days I always managed to find charming hotels or a bed and breakfast. Not only are there many quiet roads through the small villages but there are now many separate bike paths which often run independently from the roads. This is called the Voie Verte, (the Green Path), and is well marked everywhere. This path was always pleasant and it was nice to know when you’re on the right path but I find it a little less interesting as I prefer to pass through the villages and take in the architecture, cafés, town plazas, and the local people going about their lives. Everywhere was so beautiful that I constantly stopped to sketch. The French have a deep respect for the artist and are very enthusiastic when peeking over your shoulder. I saw many cyclists pass me by with huge packs on their bikes but for me the shorter the distance travelled the more successful the day. My second night I stayed at a bed and breakfast near Beaugency, a lovely town right on the river. My hosts were les Gratelievres in Tavers. The price for most bed and breakfast lodging was around $60 to $70, and a two star hotel was slightly more. The advantage of the guest houses are the formidable breakfasts provided. At les Gratelievres the offerings covered an entire table with homemade baked goods, pastries, cereals, pies, fruit and much more.

I felt right at home now on my bike, like sliding into the saddle of your old horse. My days were punctuated by frequent stops at cafés which are also the best places to savor the local culture. Before I travel I cut up large sheets of heavy paper to draw my own post cards in pen and ink. A small drawing will take me less than an hour, a good time to sip a café or drink a beer. The weather was very hot so rather than slow myself down too much with beer I often drank a panaché which is half beer and half lemonade. When people see you drawing they are curious at first and then carry on as if you weren’t there, so it’s a wonderful cover for eavesdropping. Sitting on the terrace of a café is a good time to study your map and gaze up and down the street and think about how lucky you are to be there. As Dr. Johnson said, the throne of human felicity is a pub chair. Basically, by ordering an espresso you have rented your seat for as long as you choose to sit and a waiter will never bother you to order more or pay until you request the bill. Likewise I was rather surprised that at all hotels they seemed rather taken aback if I offered to pay when I checked in. All they required was your name, no passport, no credit card, and they trusted you to settle matters in the morning.

Almost every village I passed through had a statue, plaza, or street named after Joan of Arc or St. Martin. The mind boggles to think of Joan of Arc standing in the very same place where you are sitting or walking through a peaceful plaza surrounded by plane trees. My next stop was Blois, a town on the Loire which I didn’t know but which quickly felt like home. I walked my bike into the city center attracted by the Chateau de Blois which dominates the old city. Opposite the chateau was the large and elegant Hotel de France et Guise. I checked the rates posted which were very reasonable and quickly checked in. A very nice couple ran the hotel who couldn’t have been more friendly. They had a garage behind the hotel for my bike which was never a problem anywhere. The town has an elegance and sense of well being as it rises steeply from the riverside to the higher streets of medieval houses in surprisingly good condition overlooking the river. The most famous of these old timbered houses is the Maison des Acrobates. The name comes from the carved figures which adorn the exterior. The house and carvings are in amazing condition considering that the house dates from 1470. The Cathedral of St Louis dominates the upper city and behind the church are the large Bishop’s Palace Gardens with yet another golden statue of Joan of Arc which looks down on the cities rooftops and a wide expanse of the Loire and opposite banks. On the opposite and lower side of town stands the distinctive church and three large towers of Saint Nicolas constructed in the 16th century. The city is full of historical and architectural marvels but is not large and a walking tour of the central area can be done in an hour and a half. Of course there is no lack of restaurants. I had dinner on a lovely plaza somewhat hidden which was shared by three restaurants. I ate at the Murano which was excellent. Usually you only know one restaurant from another by the different style of chairs employed by each restaurant.

My first night in Blois I went to the sound and light show at the Chateau de Blois. I must confess that even though I am an artist and was a history major in college I don’t visit many museums or monuments while travelling. I find the daily life, shops and cafes in the streets even more interesting. Most of the famous chateaus offer these light shows at night so I thought I should see at least one. This wasn’t Pink Floyd but was very enjoyable nonetheless. Of course the show couldn’t start until after dark. The modest crowd was ushered into the spacious courtyard of the chateau and told to seat themselves in the center of the courtyard. The large paving stones weren’t very comfortable and one charming family from Brussels had brought some folding chairs. “We read the guidebooks,” they confided, and were prepared. The lights are brightly colored and outline the magnificent architecture perfectly. This allows you to see and appreciate the details of the various styles in a completely original way. The lights continually change and focus on different sections of the façade, which was constructed in various periods, as the long history of the chateau is recounted in a dramatic booming voice. The highpoint of the story is the assassination of the Duc of Guise by Catherine de Medici’s bizarre son, Henry III in 1588. The night was pleasant and warm so I went for a walk and had a drink at the Hendrix Café on a large plaza full of young couples. The memory of Jimi Hendrix burns brightly in France and adds to the tapestry of history.

The following day I took a shuttle bus to the Chateau of Chambord, arguably the most spectacular of the chateaus of the Loire. The chateau was reasonably close for a bicycle ride but I decided to save my energy for the chateau rather than arrive tired and have to repeat the same route for the return to Blois. The chateau belies description and to think something so massive was constructed only to be used for a hunting lodge is incredible. The chateau, built in the 1500’s, has four hundred rooms. Francis the 1st who oversaw the majority of construction was said to have spent only about 75 days in total at the chateau. The story is that Leonardo de Vinci designed the chateau or at least the famous double staircase, its crowning glory. The staircase is the center and spine of the structure. Like a double helix of DNA, two independent staircases wind together without intersecting. The day I was there was very hot and very crowded something that cannot be avoided in July and August when all of France is on vacation. The majority of families and young couples are polite and friendly but too many people are too many. I had to shuffle from room to room among hordes of people which detracted from the experience. However the grounds are immense and it’s not difficult to wander off to more placid areas, but with the heat it was wisest to stay in the shade. Of course like everywhere in France there was no lack of dining options next to the chateau. That evening at dinner I met a young native of the town who invited me back to his apartment after dinner with his band of friends who worked at the restaurant. Being a foreign visitor I was often treated to a special bottle of wine they had been saving but I think I was the excuse for them to open a good bottle for themselves. I carried on my bike trip the next day somewhat sadly as I was already feeling at home in Blois after only two days.

The next day I made my way to Montrichard yet another beautiful small town with the ruins of a chateau dominating the hilly prominence behind the town. I rented a room at the modest Hotel La Croix Blanche and explored the river bank and old town. I was pleased to discover a charming second hand bookstore in an ancient little building. An avid book collector, I can’t resist snooping in bookstores even when travelling on bicycle. I contented myself with buying some antique postcards which don’t weigh much at least. I was pleased to see that used and new bookstores seem to be healthier in France than in the U.S. The French are famous readers and there are many used bookstores in every town. Used bookstores in France usually feature an extensive antique print collection and other paper ephemera which are fun to browse.

I had only a short ride to the Chateau of Chenonceaux the next day which is perhaps the loveliest of all the chateaus as it is constructed across the river itself. As I cruised gently along the few kilometers to Chenonceaux I didn’t know I was in for my worst day of weather. On the way to the chateau I passed another magnificent chateau shining brightly on a hill. I noticed at the gate that it was now a hotel, the Chateau of Chissay. There were crowds as usual at Chenonceaux but everything was very well organized and I took time to eat before exploring the chateau. While I was in the interior it started raining, not hard, but steadily. The interior was fascinating and the feel of the chateau indicated that the house was constructed for pleasure and not hunting or defense. The rooms were gracious and one could easily imagine the pleasure of living there. The architectural delight of the structure is the gallery constructed by Catherine de Medici which form the bridge and arches across the river. As I continually glanced out the windows I was dismayed to see no let up in the rain. Meanwhile my bike with small bag was getting a good soak. The gardens are geometrical and extremely lovely but exploring them in the rain was impractical. I snuck out for awhile in the rain to check on my bike and tried a brief stroll through the gardens. There wasn’t much to do. Finally I gave up on the weather clearing up and decided to give myself a treat and go back a few kilometers to the Chateau de Chissay and rent a room for the night. Rooms run from $150 to about $450. I took the cheapest room which still turned out to be luxurious. The weather did clear up then so I was able to stroll the grounds but didn’t take a swim in their magnificent swimming pool. I did eat however in their restaurant, La Table de Roi, (The King’s Table), where I truly ate like a king. I enjoyed treating myself to a day of luxury but I felt a bit more removed from the true France. Most of the other guests at the hotel were foreigners, well to do families and wealthy couples but somehow less interesting than the other places I’d been staying. The following day there were intermittent showers also, but nothing serious. As I was heading west I could see the big dark clouds approaching from far away which gave me plenty of time to find shelter and wait out the usually brief showers. I waited out one shower while I had lunch in Martin-le-Beau at the Auberge de la Treille. After a nice leisurely lunch of two hours, and a half liter of wine, the skies looked much brighter. Likewise I waited out another brief shower on the terrace of a café under an awning as I leisurely sketched for forty minutes.

There was never a problem with getting lost. There are constantly signs marking the Green Route with a symbol of a bicycle which is easily recognized. There was always the river as a reference for knowing the direction, plus I had only to head toward the afternoon sun or into the breeze which kept me heading west. I like to follow my impulses and if a side road or a nearby village looked inviting, take a little detour. It was never hard to relocate one’s way. Late that afternoon I made it to Tours, a surprisingly large city. France has seen the rise of big box stores also which are always located on the outskirts of town so it is wise not to judge a town until you get into the historic center. Once in the center of Tours you are dazzled by the medieval architecture in excellent preserve. Of course the Cathedral rises above everything else and is an excellent reference for finding the center which will usually mean the tourist office and train station are also nearby. I stayed at a small, very chic little hotel, the Hotel Ronsard. As usual the owners were extremely gracious and the rates were reasonable. The interior had been completely redone in modern, clean, and subdued colors. Everything displayed impeccable taste with a lovely breakfast room and free internet service for clients. Tours is a wonderful city to walk around. The center is very lively and prosperous with innumerable interesting shops and restaurants. The Rue Colbert is lined with restaurants and is one of the liveliest streets in Tours. I sketched at a café and fell into conversation with a couple of women at the next table, one of whom was an artist and the other was the owner of a gallery across from the café. (She was keeping an eye on the shop as we drank our wine and once had to go into the shop to help clients.) That evening I wandered further along rue Colbert which turns into Rue Commerce and leads into the heart of Old Tours. Finally you arrive at a grand central plaza, Place Plumereau, surrounded by the distinctive timber framed buildings that Tours is noted for. The entire plaza is covered with terraces of restaurants and they were all full, showing no evidence of any economic crisis. In France, crisis or no crisis one has to eat, and eat well at that. The atmosphere was wonderful, very lively, friendly, and a great place to socialize. The shops are all very attractive and naturally I found several bookstores where if I didn’t buy anything I at least had some pleasant conversations. I spent two days in Tours and could have stayed much longer but I received an enticing invitation from friends in the South of France to join them on their barge. My initial plan had been to ride to Anger but there was no problem in returning my bike to another shop in the Detours de la Loire group next to the train station. I loved the freedom and peace of bike riding in France and hope to do it again but next time while travelling west to east.

After a couple of days in Paris at my friends’ house I washed all my clothes and repacked my bags and took the train to Beziers to meet my friends, Bill and Sylvia Coates. I know them from California where Sylvia taught Spanish and Bill was a civil engineer. They sold their house in Pismo Beach and bought a barge in Holland which they call home in the warm months. In the winter they stay in Miami or visit their son in Los Angeles. I’ve been hearing about their boat and looking at photos ever since they bought it five years ago and this seemed like the perfect chance to see it in person. They told me they were in one of the most picturesque sections of the Canal du Midi and that they would return to Beziers to meet me. Beziers is near the Spanish border and the Mediterranean. I took the TGV (the fast train) from Paris and arrived in Beziers after only four hours. Although I’d lived in the South of France I’d never been to Beziers. Bill and Sylvia met me at the train station and as we walked away from the station I asked where their car was. They laughed and said they’d come on foot. The canal and basin where their boat was docked was only a five minute walk away. They do keep a car in France but only use it rarely. We passed a charming café right out of Marcel Pagnol and arrived at the basin about the width of a small river. There were about ten or fifteen boats of various description and they proudly led me to the love of their lives, the Biesboch, their boat. The boat was built in the 1940’s and had lovely lines. They were especially proud because the boat had just come out of dry dock where she had been completely repainted in black and white with a little trim work in red and yellow. This was a real canal boat with a steel hull which had once been used to haul cargo. Now it was a cozy residence with an interior that resembled a jewel box of beautiful woodwork. I was given a tour of the boat and Bill was eager to point out all the design elements. When they bought the boat it was already livable and in good shape but Bill then spent two years further remodeling and improving the interior. He claims that he isn’t finished but everything looked perfect to me. The lower portion of their boat houses the living room, complete kitchen and bedroom. There is even a small laundry room in the front of the boat. I would be sleeping in the wheel house above. There, the table and benches could be converted into a bed. There was also the possibility of another bed above the hatch which led down to the bathroom. The bathroom, in the lower rear portion of the boat was completely modern with all conveniences including a shower. They were currently tied up at the city docks but were also completely independent and had electricity and water even tying up in the middle of the country.

The atmosphere in the little basin was very folksy with other boaters strolling by exchanging greetings and working on their boats. For Bill and most canal people, happiness is tinkering with their boats. There were a couple of huge barges nearby, one of which was a spa and rested in place and another which was owned by a couple of ladies and was currently rented for an adventure camp for the young. There were other boats of a more bohemian nature that would have looked at home in Sausalito. There was a large barge which was owned by a young couple who were busy doing major work on their boat to adapt it to a hotel/barge. Some of these hotel/barges offer luxury accommodations and gourmet meals. Huge plane trees lined both banks of the canal and they were reflected in the calm waters of the canal. The sun of the Midi was pounding down so we naturally broke out the Pastis which never tastes so good as when you are in the Midi. We found some shade on the banks and settled in for a relaxing *aperitif.* The cicadas chirped loudly all around us and now only one thing was missing from a classic moment in Provence, a game of *boules.* I love to play petanque, more familiarly called boules, and is just a step above doing nothing but incorporates a little competition and lot of camaraderie. To my delight they had some boules on board and it was a simple matter of walking down the dockside to a little park with shade trees and tossing the metal balls. As we played, a couple of young men joined us in the park and started up their own game. Their ability far exceeded ours as could be noted by all the loud clacking from knocking each other’s balls out of competition. (Petanque and Bocce are essentially the same game.) After playing for a while there was that nostalgic café right across from us and the terrace was too inviting to be resisted so we installed ourselves and consumed another round of Pastis. The interior of the café was full of souvenirs and photos of canal life including photos of jousting tournaments on the boats which is still a popular event. That evening we grilled sausages (the real saucisse de Toulouse I was assured) on the dockside and ate like royalty.

The following day we spent strolling about Beziers since I didn’t know the town and showed an interest in exploring. We tried to keep in the shade as we walked higher and higher into the city center. Like most old villages and towns, Beziers was constructed on a height and the Cathedral is at the summit. Beziers was much larger and more interesting than I had imagined. We ended up having a huge, long lunch on the main boulevard, the Allee Paul Riquet, which was lined with restaurants with outdoor terraces. They all looked so good so we simply took our chance, perhaps enticed by the charming girl who welcomed us. Mussels were the specialty so I ordered a big pot of them and in keeping with local custom ordered a bottle of rosé which is what everyone drinks in the Midi in the summer. We rose from the table hours later and sleepy from the heat and wine. Bill and Sylvia returned to their boat but I spent the afternoon roaming the winding streets getting a little lost and sketching some wonderful views. In front of the cathedral I sketched a dizzying view of rooftops and the river valley which receded toward the distant hills and mountains. When I went back to the boat I took one of Bill and Sylvia’s bikes which they keep on board and explored a little up and down the canal as a preview for the morrow. The canals have many uses including irrigation and there is always a path alongside which provides an excellent route for cycling. Near a town, as here in Beziers, there are also a lot of joggers along the canal and I passed a small health club near one of the bridges.

The following day we finally set off and Bill was more than a little excited because we would be going through the famous nine locks of Fonséranes. They are listed on the UNESCO World Heritage sites and are quite the tourist attraction as well. The locks only open twice a day so we had to be prepared to be there for the morning opening. The Canal du Midi was conceived by Paul Riquet and built from 1667 to 1694, employing up to 12,000 men in their construction. Riquet is rightly hailed as a genius and statues stand everywhere in the region in his honor as well as many other streets and place names. The canal was conceived as a way of linking the Atlantic Ocean with the Mediterranean, a purpose it still serves today. Most of the canals and locks remain as built in the 17th century, a marvel in itself, and all of the bridges crossing the canal have distinctive charm, decorations and sculptures. With beautiful weather we gently cruised westward toward the locks with Bill at the wheel and Sylvia and I on the deck sightseeing and ready to handle the lines. We joined an informal line waiting to go through the locks as Bill kept a wary eye on other boats that might scrape against his baby or attempt to cut in line. We had to wait for the line of boats coming from the opposite direction to clear the whole series of locks before we could begin to ascend this staircase of locks toward the west. The wait seemed unusually long so I got off the boat and wandered ahead to watch the operation of the locks. I was treated to an amusing human spectacle as the master of the locks had instructed too many boats to enter one lock at a time, something Bill hates as it increases the chances of bumping and scraping. In one of the locks half way up the staircase four boats had become tightly wedged in the lock and couldn’t exit even after the water level had been lowered. The boats were rentals which meant that the captains were amateurs and had little idea of what they were doing. Their wives and children were giving them unwanted advice and a growing crowd of onlookers were gathering around the upper edges of the lock to watch. No matter what they tried the boats were firmly jammed together. When they released more water from the upper lock the torrential spray soaked these wannabe captains to the skin. As typical in France, everyone had an opinion on what to do. A lively discussion and shouting ensued from all sides. The least concerned of them all was the locksman who sat down under a tree in the shade to smoke a cigarette. This went on for well over an hour with everyone enjoying the whole mess. When the boats finally broke free there was a loud round of cheers. Our turn finally came and I helped guide the boat through by holding the guidelines and leading the boat through each stage and attaching her to the ancient concrete pillars on the sides of the locks. I felt pretty proud of myself as I shooed the tourists and onlookers aside. When we finally cleared the locks we were in for a day of quiet and peaceful cruising. The boat glides along at a speed even slower than a bicycle. You are continually flowing through an alleyway of plane trees which give a stately elegance to the route. At one point the canal is actually a bridge which crosses the Orb River. Cruising on a waterway while suspended in the air is mind boggling. As we departed Beziers there were some marvelous views of Beziers in profile perched high above us in the distance with the Cathedral of St. Nazaire in silhouette where I had sketched the day before. We now entered a peaceful, dreamlike landscape of a curving waterway surrounded by endless vineyards in all directions. A boat might pass us in the other direction every fifteen minutes or so and often Bill and Sylvia would recognize friends from the approach of a boat. “Oh look,” they’d say, “it’s so and so,” giving the name of their boat rather than the person’s name. It’s been said that the canal is a long village and the boaters know each other well even though they might cross paths infrequently. Gossip can travel faster than the boats and there is romance and intrigue among the boaters just as in any village. Sometimes the surrounding landscape is higher than the boats and sometimes it is actually lower. The lines of plane trees were planted along the canal to shore up the banks of the canal with their roots. An added bonus is that the exposed roots provide excellent anchorage at any point along the canal. We’d only been cruising a while but it was already time for lunch so we tied to the shore to enjoy a leisurely lunch and give Bill a break from steering the boat. There are surprisingly few commercial places along the canal except for passing through little villages every five or ten miles. The Biesboch is very self contained so they had everything for lunch and for days to come if they so chose. After lunch I would sit and sketch on the banks or take a little walk along the towpath.

Bill let me steer the boat in the afternoon for awhile which proved to be a little more difficult than I’d imagined. A canal boat does not turn on a dime nor does it stop quickly. This means going slow and always anticipating what is ahead. Bill hates it when boats are travelling too fast or riding too close to the center while passing. His bane is all the rental boats. The largest rental agency is called Le Boat ([www.leboat.com](http://www.leboat.com)) and many of the rental agencies proudly advertise “No license required” which means that you can walk in off the street and rent a boat. It’s a little scary when you see an amateur coming toward you, too fast, and weaving from side to side. The boat responds slowly and once it takes the turn the tendency is to overcorrect in the other direction which ends up causing a continuous fishtail motion. Regardless of their abilities, everyone on the rental boats appeared to be having a good time. I gripped the big wheel tightly and tried to give the wheel a little play while aiming her down the middle of the canal. I couldn’t see as well in the wheel house and was a bit nervous to be looking away from the water anyway. When Bill relieved me I was happy to join Sylvia on the deck where we laid back and chatted way the hours in between taking photos. Eventually you slow down taking photos or else that is all you would be doing in trying to capture all the passing beauty. We passed through Capestang, another beautiful little village that was bustling in preparations for their village fete that night. We tied up the boat and walked around the village to do a little shopping and sightseeing, you know, just the essentials, cigarettes, bread, and wine. There was a big stage set up for the concerts that evening and the cooks were getting ready giant paella pans. Huge quantities of ingredients were being chopped and cleaned. Everyone was in a good mood and we stopped and chatted with several people. There is an enormous church, the Collegiale, from the 13th century which was once much larger. Even the remaining section dwarfs the village. This entire region of Languedoc is known as Cathar territory. The Carthars were a Catholic splinter group who believed in a purer version of Catholicism. This led to persecution by the main body of the church and finally a massacre in Beziers in 1209. Now, this is a proud heritage and many towns boast of being Cathar strongholds.

We left Capestang behind and slowly cruised on. Bill and Sylvia had a nice spot in mind to tie up for the evening a few miles further on. The canal is rarely in a straight line and is continually curving from side to side in wide, gentle arcs. The canal follows the landscape by necessity and I think the curves were designed for aesthetic beauty also. Thomas Jefferson once road on this canal for pleasure while he resided in France. Capestang and the giant church tower could still be seen from miles away and the setting sun created an ever more magical glow to this peaceful landscape. Finally, at one bend of the river Bill declared “This is it!” and we slowed to a stop. Between us and the village were rolling hills of vineyards divided by old stone walls with little stone cabins artfully placed here and there. The church tower now took on a peachy glow as a full moon rose behind the village. As Sylvia organized the kitchen I went up on the bank to sketch and Bill as usual tinkered with the lines and other little adjustments to the boat. The only sounds were the cicadas and the breeze in the leaves overhead. We had a wonderful evening as the dinner hour stretched later and later into the night as we shared stories over glass after glass of wine. Sylvia recounted how as a young girl she had sat in the front row of a Charles Aznavour concert and during his rendition of “La Boheme” he had tossed his handkerchief to her. Much to her surprise after the concert he came out to her place and asked for his handkerchief back!

The next day we went to Somail, a very small village but very large in charm. It seems to be a favorite with boaters and tourists alike. There are a number of Bed and Breakfast establishments and several good restaurants. We had an excellent leisurely lunch canal side at l’O a la Bouche where I had one of the southwest’s most famous dishes, cassoulet. From our table we could gaze at the ancient little bridge which is the glory of this little hamlet. The stone bridge is in a lovely large arc which connects to an ancient stone chapel at one end. On the other side of the canal was the boat where Rick Stein, the English chef, had filmed his culinary travel series while travelling through the canal du Midi. This tiny hamlet also featured several art galleries where I was so impressed with work by Denis Carriere that I bought two originals. In addition there is a doll museum and a hat museum. Bill and Sylvia know that I am a book collector and they had been telling me for days how I had to visit the second-hand bookstore in Somail. I didn’t expect much especially from such a tiny little village. The bookstore, located in the hear t of the village in an old house, is called Le Trouve Tout du Livre. I liked the outside with portraits of famous authors and many quotations. Outdoors are racks of cheaper books and antique postcards. I wasn’t prepared for what the interior held. This was the largest second hand bookstore I had ever seen in France which extended room after room seemingly without end. There were many people inside the bookstore, all somewhat hushed in awe at the expanse and quantity of books. The stock was well organized with every subject under the sun as well as sections in many languages. Room after room was crammed with books including a mezzanine offering a dazzling view of a world of books below. I wanted to leave but I couldn’t. I called upon my strongest will and managed to leave with only a few small purchases.

We tied up in town along with a dozen or so other boats and I took another bicycle trip around the immediate vicinity. We ate on board that night and were treated to a ferocious summer storm. There were massive flashes of lightning and a torrential rain that seemed to lash us in a horizontal direction. It was a little scary as the boat creaked and tested her moorings. Bill had to rescue his favorite deck chair from outside but that accomplished we hunkered down in comfort and enjoyed ourselves. The morning broke clear and sunny and other boaters were out inspecting the effects of the storm. The Biesboch had pulled a few feet away from shore but was still firmly attached to her lines. I took a walk around and saw a number of large tree limbs down as well as odds and ends scattered around like the unavoidable white plastic chairs. I stopped in at the “bateau/epicerie” (the grocery barge) where everyone was chatting about the storm. The interior of the barge had everything you would ever need, from batteries to foodstuffs to souvenirs. I bought a cute little woven purse in the shape of a “deux chevaux”, a little Citroen car, for my daughter. The lady in the shop told me it was made in Madagascar. There was a fair in town that day of local produce featuring a lot of the local sausage, breads, wines, liqueurs, jewelry, art, etc. I couldn’t resist trying some fig liqueur which led to other liqueurs. I kept telling myself, it’s okay to drink in the daytime; you’re on vacation. Apparently the French don’t need to excuse themselves. There was even a *bouquiniste*, a used book seller, and once again I couldn’t resist picking up a little volume entitled “Baba Cool” by Francoise Brégis. Baba Cool is what the French call hippies. The book turned out to be an amusing series of short stories of bohemians and expatriates living in the south of France which I read on the train back to Paris. Bill and Sylvia were also enthralled with the local color and we all made small purchases most of which we consumed at lunch.

Even Somail had an excellent tourist office combined with an art gallery. They were very helpful in finding me a taxi and the schedule for the trains back to Paris. I regretted leaving the Biesboch, and Bill and Sylvia couldn’t have been more gracious, but I was on my way to visit a painter friend in another region of France. The taxi took me the short drive to Narbonne where I caught another rapid train back to Paris. The taxi driver was a nice woman with a thick southern accent and we chatted all the way to Narbonne in her new minivan. I wished I could have stayed longer in Narbonne which I’ve heard many good things about, but once you’ve been somewhere once it becomes much easier to return. I would gladly extend a bike or barge trip by weeks given the time. I’ve always believed that the slower you go, the faster you get there. In other words, taking life leisurely, time flies.

**INFORMATION**

Web sites:

<http://www.loireradweg.org/index_en.htm>

<http://www.loirevelonature.com/en/>

Bike Rentals:

<http://www.locationdevelos.com/>

Hotels:

<http://www.hotel-france-guise-blois.federal-hotel.com/page_en_1.html>

<http://www.chateauchissay.com/index.html>

<http://www.activehotels.com/wl/servlet/xmlbrochure/index.do?hotelid=181742&language=en>

Boat Rentals:

<http://www.leboat.com/?gclid=CLHM64fbg50CFSFRagodkFiFaw>

<http://www.minervoiscruisers.com/english/main/entry_page.asp>

Trains in France:

<http://www.tgv-europe.com/en/>